



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

International Day in Support of Victims of Torture

Thursday, June 25, 2015

10:30 am – 11:30 am

H-137 of the U.S. Capitol Building

Panelists

HRH Forchenmbin Charles

HRH Forchenmbin Charles Abessoh is a traditional tribal chief from the South West Anglophone region of Cameroon. He holds a Master's Degree in English Modern Letters from Yaounde University and taught English in government and private secondary schools for 22 years. He is also a poet whose publications have appeared in magazines and newspapers. He was tortured by the dictatorial regime of Paul Biya, in power for 33 years, for denouncing government corruption and speaking out against persecution of the Anglophone minority in Cameroon. Forchenmbin was detained by the secret police for two weeks after he wrote flyers criticizing corruption and fraud in the 2011 presidential election. After he was released and placed under house arrest, he escaped to Nigeria. He arrived in the United States in 2013 and was placed in immigration detention in Eloy, Arizona for seven months. Forchenmbin applied for political asylum and is now waiting for a date with the immigration court. He is very worried about his wife and five children in Cameroon who had to leave their home and go into hiding because of constant police harassment.



Feyera Sobokssa

Feyera Sobokssa is a torture survivor from Ethiopia who received political asylum in 2001. He began his political activities as a young man employed as an accountant by Ethiopian Airlines, helping to distribute publications about the Oromo ethnic group inside Ethiopia and their history of persecution by the Ethiopian government. Feyera was arrested and brought to a military camp, where he was given a hallucinogenic drug which forced to him to



perform “dances” in front of military officers who interrogated him about the books he was reading. In December 1995, Ethiopian security officials subjected him to “Code Number Eight,” one of the worst forms of torture. They tied his elbows together, damaging ligaments and muscles in his arms and chest. He still remembers the unbearable pain 20 years later. Feyera has now become a spokesman against torture with TASSC; he is a strong advocate for human rights and for raising awareness about the plight of the Oromos and other Ethiopians.

Alene Tewodajj

Alene Tewodajj was a taxi driver in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia who had demonstrated little interest in politics before the 2005 election in his country. But after this highly contested election, with widespread allegations of fraud, police began stopping his taxi and seizing his customers. After hearing the same kind of story from other taxi drivers, Alene decided to join Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ), an opposition political party. Between 2010 and 2013 he was arrested almost 20 times just for seeking to participate in political life. In 2012, he was taken to a secret building with three other political activists. The police tortured him severely, breaking his teeth, his nose, the inside of his mouth and his backbone. That was when Alene decided to flee Ethiopia and seek political asylum in the United States. He crossed the U.S.-Mexican border in 2013 and sought assistance from TASSC while he was going the lengthy process of applying for asylum. Alene finally was granted asylum in 2015 and is on his way to a new life in the United States.



Moderator

Andrea Barron

Andrea Barron is the Advocacy Officer at the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC) International. Founded by survivors of torture in 1998, TASSC provides supportive counseling, pro bono legal assistance, employment counseling, health services, housing and other services to torture survivors in the Washington metropolitan area. The advocacy program seeks to empower survivors and educate policymakers and the public about torture and the broader issues of human rights, especially in Africa where the majority of TASSC survivors are from.